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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 15258

file - Colombia

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: PGOV, PINS, PTER, CO
SUBJECT: AFTER BLACK NOVEMBER

1. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT
2. SUMMARY: COLOMBIA HAS ENDURED A MONTH OF BLOOD AND MUD. COMING OUT THE OTHER SIDE OF "BLACK NOVEMBER," THE NATIONAL SCENE APPEARS CHANGED IN PARTICULARS BUT SOUND IN ITS ESSENTIALS. THE DEEPLY ROOTED DEMOCRATIC TRADITIONS OF THE NATION HAVE BEEN TESTED, BUT HAVE SURVIVED. ON A PERSONAL LEVEL, PRESIDENT BETANCUR SHOWED UP WELL DURING BOTH THE PALACE OF JUSTICE AND THE VOLCANO DISASTERS. (IN OUR VIEW, THE LATTER WILL NOT PROVE A MAJOR FACTOR TO HELP OR HARM). PUBLIC OPINION HAS INITIALLY RALLIED AROUND HIS LEADERSHIP. THIS TEMPORARY INCREASE IN HIS STANDING, FROM THE LOW LEVEL OF THE LAST YEAR, NONETHELESS MASKS A NEAR BANKRUPTCY OF POLICY. CONTADORA, THE PRIMARY FOCUS OF BETANCUR'S FOREIGN POLICY, IS IN POOR SHAPE AND WILL (AT LEAST AS REGARDS A COLOMBIAN ROLE) BE FURTHER DAMAGED WHEN THE SANDINISTA/M-19 CONNECTION BECOMES WIDELY KNOWN. THE PEACE PROCESS HE MADE THE CENTER-PIECE OF HIS ADMINISTRATION IS ON ITS LAST LEGS. ALL THE MAJOR GUERRILLA FORCES ARE NOW OUTSIDE IT EXCEPT THE FARC. BETANCUR HIMSELF IS CLINGING TO THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE FARC AND THE OUTSIDERS (M-19, ELN, AND EPL). THIS DIFFERENCE MAY PROVE IMPOSSIBLE TO MAINTAIN, AS INCIDENTS BETWEEN THE FARC AND GOC FORCES INTENSIFY. THE FARC WILL CONFRONT INCREASED PRESSURE -- INCLUDING PERHAPS FROM BETANCUR HIMSELF -- TO EITHER DISARM OUTRIGHT AND REJOIN CIVIL SOCIETY, OR FOLLOW THE GUERRILLA ROAD AND LEAVE THE PEACE PROCESS. BETANCUR, NOT COLOMBIA, MAY NOW BE THE CENTRAL FIGURE IN THE GREEK TRAGEDY HE REFERRED TO IN HIS CONVERSATION WITH SECRETARY SHULTZ AND OTHERS IN RECENT DAYS. LOOKING BEYOND THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION NEXT MAY, THE ODDS FAVOR A CYCLICAL SWING TO THE RIGHT IN COLOMBIAN POLITICS, REGARDLESS OF WHICH MAJOR CANDIDATE WINS THE PRESIDENCY, AND INCREASED RELIANCE ON MILITARY

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

25X1

CONFIDENTIAL

85 9219664

SCP

PAGE 002

NC 9219664

TOR: 052324Z DEC 85

BOGOTA 15258

ACTION TO RESTORE PUBLIC ORDER. AT THAT TIME, WE EXPECT A GOC REQUEST FOR AN INCREASE IN USG SECURITY ASSISTANCE. WITH THESE GENERALLY FAVORABLE PROSPECTS, WE ARE SKEPTICAL OF REPORTS THAT THE MILITARY CONTEMPLATE ANY ACTION AGAINST BETANCUR OR THE ESTABLISHED ORDER. WE ANTICIPATE THE CONTINUATION OF PRESENT USG POLICIES TOWARDS COLOMBIA, AND OF THAT NATION'S OWN DEMOCRATIC TRADITIONS. END SUMMARY

3. BETANCUR'S LEADERSHIP IN THE PALACE OF JUSTICE INCIDENT: COLOMBIAN POLITICAL LIFE LIVES OFF RUMORS, ESPECIALLY DISCREDITABLE ONES. MANY FIND IT IMPOSSIBLE TO BELIEVE THAT BETANCUR, THE ENDLESSLY-PATIENT MAN OF PEACE, WOULD ORDER THE RECAPTURE OF THE PALACE OF JUSTICE AND ACCEPT THE NEAR CERTAINTY OF THE HOSTAGES' DEATHS. MOST ALTERNATE THEORIES FOCUS ON THE MILITARY, AND THE ALLEGEDLY IRRESTIBLE PRESSURE THEY WERE SAID TO HAVE APPLIED. WE BELIEVE THAT THE PROCESS OF DECISION MAKING WAS MORE COMPLEX, AND MORE TYPICALLY COLOMBIAN, THAN SUCH STORIES SUGGEST. THE MILITARY ARE A NORMAL AND IMPORTANT FACTOR IN MANY DECISIONS HERE, INCLUDING THE PALACE OF JUSTICE ATTACK. THIS DOES NOT MEAN CRUDE PRESSURE. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE FIRST COUNTER-ATTACK BY MILITARY AND POLICE, DURING THE AFTERNOON HOURS OF NOVEMBER 6, WAS MADE WITHOUT CLEAR LEADERSHIP FROM THE PRESIDENT, ALTHOUGH NOT IN OUR VIEW OVER HIS OBJECTIONS. THAT COUNTER-ATTACK FAILED TO CARRY ALL THE M-19 STRONGHOLDS WITHIN THE BUILDING OR TO RESCUE THE SENIOR HOSTAGES. AT THAT POINT, ALTHOUGH SHOOTING CONTINUED, THERE WAS A VIRTUAL PAUSE LASTING UNTIL THE EARLY HOURS OF NOVEMBER 7. BATTLE LINES WITHIN THE BUILDING WERE RELATIVELY STABLE, AND COMMUNICATIONS COULD EASILY HAVE BEEN RE-OPENED WITH M-19 LEADERS HAD THERE BEEN ANY DESIRE TO DO SO. THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS MET CONTINUOUSLY UNDER BETANCUR'S LEADERSHIP. NOTHING WE HEARD, THEN OR SUBSEQUENTLY, SUGGESTS THAT BETANCUR SHOWED ANY DESIRE TO NEGOTIATE. ON THE CONTRARY, HE SPENT THE TIME IN CALLING EX-PRESIDENTS AND OTHER MAJOR POWER BROKERS, OBTAINING THEIR BLANK-CHECK SUPPORT FOR A HARD STAND AGAINST M-19. IN SHORT, WE BELIEVE THAT A SUBSTANTIAL CONSENSUS EXISTED AMONG THE COLOMBIAN ELITE THAT NEGOTIATIONS WOULD UNACCEPTABLY DAMAGE THE LEGITIMACY AND PUBLIC RESPECT OF THE GOVERNMENT. WE BELIEVE THAT BETANCUR SHARED THIS ASSESSMENT. WHILE A MAN OF PEACE, HE IS NEITHER A PACIFIST NOR A WEAKLING. HIS RESPONSE WAS PERFECTLY CONSISTENT WITH THE LINE HE TOOK DURING THE 1983 GUERRILLA KIDNAPPING OF HIS OWN BROTHER,

E.O. 12356: DECL:OADR

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1. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT

AND WITH HIS PRIVATE CRITICISM OF SALVADORAN PRESIDENT DUARTE'S HANDLING OF THE INEZ DUARTE KIDNAPPING. UNDER THE PRESS OF TIME, THE CHAIN OF COMMAND FOR PARTICULAR DECISIONS DURING THE PALACE OF JUSTICE ATTACK MAY OCCASIONALLY HAVE BEEN UNCLEAR, BUT WE SEE NO REASON TO BELIEVE THAT BETANCUR AND HIS GENERALS WERE EVER ON OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE ISSUE.

4. A VOLCANO BREAK: THE EXISTENCE OF A BROAD CONSENSUS AGAINST NEGOTIATING WITH M-19 DID NOT PRECLUDE OPPOSITION BACK-BITING ONCE THE IMMEDIATE CRISIS WAS OVER. THE OFFICIAL LIBERALS UNDER VIRGILIO BARCO BEGAN A FAIRLY SOPHISTICATED ATTACK ON BETANCUR'S LEADERSHIP. WHILE CONTINUING TO SUPPORT THE DECISION TO COUNTER-ATTACK, THEY ARGUED THAT IF BETANCUR HAD NOT GIVEN THE

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

85 9219664

SCP

PAGE 003

NC 9219664

TOR: 052324Z DEC 85

BOGOTA 15258

IMPRESSION THAT M-19 COULD ALWAYS COUNT ON FURTHER OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIALOGUE, THE GUERRILLA LEADERS WOULD NOT HAVE FATALY MISCALCULATED HIS RESPONSE TO THE PALACE OF JUSTICE ATTACK. HOWEVER, EVEN A SOPHISTICATED ATTACK ON BETANCUR RISKED LEAVING THE IMPRESSION THAT THE LIBERALS WERE, IN SOME MEASURE, "THE FRIENDS OF OUR FOES (M-19)." THE GOVERNMENT VIGOROUSLY RESPONDED. DIVISIONS APPEARED WITHIN OFFICIAL LIBERAL RANKS, WHILE THE CONSERVATIVES UNITED. JUST AT THAT MOMENT, THE NEVADO DEL RUIZ ERUPTED AND ORDINARY BUSINESS WAS SUSPENDED FOR ABOUT TWO WEEKS. DURING THIS PAUSE, BETANCUR HAD AMPLE OPPORTUNITY TO "LOOK PRESIDENTIAL" IN THE US PARLANCE. EXPERIENCE SUGGESTS THAT SUCH DISASTERS, IF NOT TOO SERIOUS -- AND IN PROPORTION TO THE COUNTRY'S SIZE THE VOLCANO ERUPTION WAS LARGE BUT NOT CRUSHING -- HELP THE GOVERNMENT IN POWER. BETANCUR WAS ABLE TO SHOW HIMSELF IN THE RELIEF EFFORT, WHILE ATTENTION WAS TURNED AWAY FROM THE SECURITY AND ECONOMIC WOES OF THE NATION. UNLESS THE RELIEF EFFORT IS BADLY MISMANAGED, AND WE THINK IT HAS BEEN REASONABLY COMPETENT, BETANCUR WILL TAKE NO HARM FROM THE VOLCANO DISASTER. THE POSITIVE EFFECTS, FOR THEIR PART, ARE ALSO UNLIKELY TO LAST LONG AS PUBLIC ATTENTION RETURNS TO MORE FUNDAMENTAL CONCERNS.

5. PEACE PROCESS FOR WHOM?: AT THE TIME OF THE PALACE OF JUSTICE ATTACK, THE "MAOIST" EPL GUERRILLAS STILL CLAIMED TO BE IN THE PEACE PROCESS AND OCCASIONALLY ATTENDED PEACE COMMISSION MEETINGS, ALTHOUGH THEY HAD LONG SINCE RESUMED OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS. (THE M-19 HAD ANNOUNCED ITS WITHDRAWAL, AND THE "CASTROITE" ELN HAD NEVER BEEN A PARTY TO THE TRUCE.) AFTERWARDS, THE EPL MIGHT HAVE KEPT A LOW PROFILE TO AVOID THE INEVITABLE REACTION AGAINST THE M-19. BUT REVOLUTIONARY LOGIC AND COMMON SENSE DO NOT ALWAYS MARCH TOGETHER: THE EPL HAS INSTEAD MOVED TO REAFFIRM ITS ALLIANCE WITH M-19, CONDUCTED JOINT OPERATIONS AND, AFTER THE ASSASSINATION OF ITS LEADER OSCAR WILLIAM CALVO IN BOGOTA NOVEMBER 20, ABANDONED THE PEACE PROCESS. THIS LEAVES ONLY THE ARMED FORCES OF THE COLOMBIAN REVOLUTION (FARC), AN AFFILIATE OF THE MOSCOW-LINE COMMUNIST PARTY OF COLOMBIA (PCC), INSIDE THE PEACE PROCESS.

6. THE FARC, THE MILITARY, AND THE FUTURE: THE FARC ACCOUNTS FOR HALF OF ALL OF GUERRILLAS IN COLOMBIA. IT HAS FORMED A LEGAL POLITICAL PARTY (THE PATRIOTIC UNION OR "UP") TO CONTEST THE ELECTIONS WITH BACING FROM THE PCC AND SOME SMALLER LEFTIST GROUPINGS, AND HAS NOMINATED VETERAN GUERRILLA JACOBO ARENAS FOR PRESIDENT. ESTIMATES ARE THAT THE UP MAY TAKE 3-5 PERCENT, AND ELECT A FEW CONGRESSMEN. IF BETANCUR CAN KEEP THE FARC/U IN THE PEACE PROCESS, HE CAN POINT TO AT LEAST SOME RETURN FROM HIS THREE YEAR INVESTMENT IN NATIONAL RECONCILIATION. BUT PRESSURES ARE INCREASING. DESPITE THE PROBABLE RENEWAL OF THE CEASEFIRE, THE FARC/UP MAY NOT STAY WITHIN THE PROCESS THROUGH THE ELECTIONS. THE POPULAR AND REACTIONS AGAINST M-19 AND ITS ALLIES INEVITABLY SPILL OVER ONTO THE FARC, WHOSE IDEOLOGY IS SIMILAR EVEN IF ITS TACTICS ARE TEMPORARILY DIFFERENT. BETANCUR HIMSELF HAS LONG STRESSED THAT GROUPS COULD NOT BE BOTH ARMED GUERRILLAS AND LEGAL PARTIES. THE FARC/UP HAS BEEN DOING JUST THAT, WITH BETANCUR'S TOLERATION. IN THE POST-NOVEMBER WORLD, SUCH TOLERATION CANNOT BE ASSUMED EVEN FROM BETANCUR, AND PARTICULARLY NOT FROM THE MILITARY. IT IS AT THIS POINT THAT WE DO GIVE SOME CREDENCE TO REPORTS OF MILITARY DIFFERENCES FROM THE BETANCUR GOVERNMENT. WE HAVE BEGUN TO SUSPECT THAT SOME OF THE LEFTIST PROPAGANDA ABOUT SECURITY FORCE "PROVOCATIONS", PLOTS

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

85 9219664 SCP

PAGE 004
TOR: 052324Z DEC 85NC 9219664
BOGOTA 15258E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: PGOV, PINS, PTER, CO
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AGAINST THE PEACE PROCESS, UNDERMINING OF THE GOC-FARC TRUCE, AND ASSASSINATIONS OF INDIVIDUAL LEADERS, CONTAIN A GERM OF TRUTH. TRUTH, AT LEAST IN THE LIMITED SENSE THAT THE MILITARY MAY BE PROVOKING SOME CONFRONTATIONS WITH THE GUERRILLAS. IT IS TOO EARLY TO SAY HOW MUCH MORE.

EVEN IF TRUE, THESE STORIES FALL SHORT OF ANY MOVE AGAINST BETANCUR HIMSELF. INSTEAD, THEY WOULD INDICATE THAT SOME WITHIN THE MILITARY HAD ANTICIPATED THE FAILURE OF THE PEACE PROCESS AND THE SWING OF POLITICAL OPINION TOWARDS MORE FORCEFUL TACTICS AGAINST INSURGENTS. WITH SUCH VIEWS NOW GAINING WIDER ACCEPTANCE, AND WITH THE VIRTUAL CERTAINTY THAT THE NEXT PRESIDENT WILL TAKE A HARDER LINE THAN BETANCUR, WE BELIEVE THAT EXTRA-LEGAL EXCESSES BY THE SECURITY FORCES ARE BECOMING LESS RATHER THAN MORE LIKELY. THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY CAN NOW ANTICIPATE A RELATIVELY FREE HAND AGAINST ALL THE GUERRILLAS EXCEPT THE FARC, AND A FREE HAND EVEN AGAINST THEM AFTER BETANCUR LEAVES OFFICE IN ONLY NINE HS. OUR ARMY ATTACHE, IN A RECENT CONVERSATION WITH GEN. GUERRERO (CHIEF OF JOINT STAFF) AND GEN. SAMUDIO RECEIVED DIRECT CONFIRMATION OF ATTITUDES WE BELIEVE TYPICAL OF GOC MILITARY LEADERS AT THIS MOMENT. THEY WERE VERY CLEAR, THAT THE MILITARY SUPPORTS THE CIVILIAN POLITICAL PROCESS. GUERRERO STATED THAT THE MILITARY WERE ON THE "MARGINS" OF THE POLITICAL PROCESS AND HAD NO HOPE OF CHANGING CURRENT POLICIES. BOTH GUERRERO AND SAMUDIO PREDICTED TO THE DATT THAT PRESIDENT BETANCUR WOULD NOT PLAY THE M-19/SANDINISTA CARD; WHILE THEY PERSONALLY DISAGREED, THEY WERE DUTY BOUND TO SUPPORT HIM. THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP IS WAITING OUT THE BETANCUR TERM AND HOPING, GUERRERO STATED, "AFTER OUR CARTER, WE HAVE A REAGAN."

7. M-19/SANDINISTA CONNECTION: A WILD CARD HAS BEEN INTRODUCED INTO THE COLOMBIAN POLITICAL GAME, IN THE FORM OF EVIDENCE OF SANDINISTA AID TO THE M-19 FORCES THAT ATTACKED THE PALACE OF JUSTICE. THE STORY IS OUT, AND GAINING MOMENTUM. BETANCUR SHOWS NO DESIRE TO PLAY THE CARD, PERHAPS BECAUSE DOING SO WOULD ALMOST SURELY END COLOMBIA'S CONTADORA ROLE. BY HESITATING, HE RISKS PUBLIC AND MILITARY CRITICISM. IT IS TOO EARLY TO SAY HOW DAMAGING THIS MIGHT BE TO HIM. THE PUBLIC HERE IS USED TO HEARING STRANGE STORIES AND RUMORS. ALTHOUGH WE REGARD THE EVIDENCE AS INCONVERTIBLE, THE COLOMBIAN PUBLIC MAY DISCOUNT IT.

8. ODD MAN OUT: WHILE WE BELIEVE BETANCUR IS SECURE AS PRESIDENT UNTIL HIS NORMAL DEPARTURE UNDER ALMOST ALL CIRCUMSTANCES, HIS POSITION IN THE COMING MONTHS IS LIKELY TO BE A DIFFICULT ONE. HE IS A PROUD LEADER AND FOR MOST OF HIS PRESIDENCY WIDELY POPULAR. NOW, HE LOOKS LIKE A LAME DUCK. HIS STRUGGLE AGAINST THIS STATUS MAY LEAD HIM TO THRASH ABOUT, LOOKING FOR NEW INITIATIVES TO RESTORE HIS PRESTIGE AND LEAVE ON A HIGH NOTE. HE MAY HAVE SOME SUCCESS. WE CAN

SEE NOTHING IN THIS PROCESS OF MORE THAN MOMENTARY CONCERN TO THE USG. A DEMOCRATIC LEADER HAS ATTEMPTED, WITHIN DEMOCRATIC MEANS, TO DEAL WITH A GREAT NATIONAL PROBLEM OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE. FOR VARIOUS REASONS, INCLUDING HIS OWN ERRORS, LACK OF SUPPORT FROM THE TRADITIONAL PARTIES, AND LACK OF REALISM AMONG THE

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

85 9219664

SCP

PAGE 005

NC 9219664

TOR: 052324Z DEC 85

BOGOTA 15258

GUERRILLAS, HE HAS IN LARGE MEASURE FAILED. NOW, WITH HIS TERM ALMOST OVER, THE ELECTORATE IS LOOKING TO OTHER MEN AND DIFFERENT MEASURES. A NORMAL AND CYCLICAL SWING TO THE RIGHT APPEARS TO BE UNDER WAY, AND THE NEXT PRESIDENT WILL PROBABLY RELY MORE ON FORCE TO RESTORE PUBLIC ORDER. THE ESSENTIALS OF USG POLICY TOJARDS COLOMBIA (INCLUDING ANTI-NARCOTICS, COUNTER-TERRORISM, AND SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT) APPEAR FULLY COMPATIBLE WITH THIS DEVELOPMENT IN COLOMBIA'S LONG TRADITION OF RESPONSIBLE CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT AND ALTERNATION IN POWER.
GILLESPIE

END OF MESSAGE

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